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Organizing Voices in Maine to Support Successful Aging

by David C. Wihry

David Wihry discusses the efforts of four associations in Maine that are supporting successful aging by organizing the voluntary, private, and public sectors; embracing a multidisciplinary perspective; and bringing together partners from across the state to make a larger impact on policy, attitudes about aging, and the well-being of older adults.

There is an increasing recognition that the challenges for supporting a thriving old age for Maine's citizens can no longer be addressed in the same ways they have been in the past. Siloed activities by organizations and actors that are bound by the norms of a single discipline, economic sector, or geographic area are no longer suitable for supporting productive aging. This article will discuss the efforts of four associations in Maine that are working to support successful aging for Mainers in a new way—one that organizes the voices of the voluntary, private, and public sectors; embraces the perspectives of multiple disciplines; and brings together partners from across the state in an effort to make a larger impact on public policy, cultural attitudes on aging, and the well-being of older adults. Although four associations are highlighted in this article, they are by no means the only ones working in aging issues in the state, as many professional associations and other entities have aging focus areas.

PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION TO FURTHER PRACTICE, RESEARCH, AND POLICY

At its core, the field of gerontology is defined by its multidisciplinary approach to understanding aging, which brings together perspectives from social sciences, natural sciences, and applied disciplines. In Maine, the group organizing the voices of gerontology in the state is the Maine Gerontological Society (MGS). With a mission of “advancing the field of aging and the care of older adults as well as their caregivers through service, training, advocacy, and research,” the society brings together a diverse group of individuals and organizations

with an interest in furthering research, practice, and policy related to aging.

A prime focus of MGS is supporting the training needs of Maine's gerontologists and disseminating knowledge of developments in the aging field. MGS distributes a regular electronic newsletter, *Gray Matters*, which has highlighted pressing issues facing older adults, from care transitions to ageism, while also informing members of legislative activity related to aging and showcasing new resources to support aging research and practice. In further support of gerontology education, MGS is a sponsor of the Maine Geriatrics Conference, which has convened Maine geriatricians yearly for 25 years to build competencies in geriatrics research, practice, and policy. As part of its mission to recognize the best in the field of gerontology, MGS also maintains a fellowship program.

A key emphasis of the MGS is playing an active role in shaping public policy. MGS developed a primer for policymakers on unmet needs for Maine's aging population that provides accessible and evidence-supported overviews and concrete policy recommendations related to food insecurity, support for family caregivers, senior housing, early onset dementia, developmental disabilities, and elder abuse.

The Dirigo-Maine Geriatrics Society is another organization in Maine, which brings together health care providers from across the state with an interest in improving health care for older adults. Recently established, the society is Maine's chapter of the American Geriatrics Society, which takes an approach similar to MGS in improving quality of life for older adults by supporting education, research, and practice.

RAISING UP THE VOICE OF MAINE'S GLBT COMMUNITY

The aging population in Maine is not a monolithic group. Though there are certain cross-cutting issues that face the aging population, individual needs and challenges facing the sub-groups of the aging population can differ. The Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE) Maine, is a recently established group focused on organizing the voices of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) elders to ensure the quality of life of these individuals. SAGE Maine is an affiliate of SAGENet, which is the network of local SAGE groups around the nation. These groups grew out of the experiences of the original SAGE organization in New York City, which sought to alleviate the health care and financial inequalities experienced by GLBT elders.

Founded in 2013, SAGE Maine has been engaged in a number of activities in line with the advocacy, educational, and social support mission of SAGE including social media outreach to connect members of the elder GLBT community throughout Maine and conducting a needs assessment of older adult GLBT Mainers. SAGE Maine has also been heavily engaged in educating and building cultural competency of providers on the unique needs and concerns of the GLBT population in Maine through activities such as integration of an education component on GLBT older adults for Maine long-term care ombudsmen who are working to protect the rights of older adults in Maine long-term care facilities. (See article by Kimmel [2015], this issue, for more details about SAGE Maine.)

MOVING AGING POLICY AGENDA FORWARD

A common theme in the effort to organize the voices supporting aging in the state of Maine is that engagement in the policy arena is crucial to magnifying the impact individual organizations are making to support the quality of life of older Mainers and to ensure that public policy at the state and local level is informed by the expertise gained through rigorous research and on-the-ground practice.

Founded in 2012, the Maine Council on Aging (MCOA) is an association of more than 50 organizations in the state, with the expressed concern “to address broad public policy concerns facing older adults in Maine.” The council has a diverse membership from the perspective of geography and professional and economic

sectors. Organizations serving York County to Aroostook County are present on the council, and though there is a strong presence from human services organizations, the council also has representation from many other types of institutions and organizations. MCOA can also be seen as almost a superstructure for the policy efforts of professional and other associations working to improve quality of life in Maine for older adults.

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A focal area in the early life of MCOA has been the Maine Aging Initiative, an organized effort spearheaded by MCOA and Speaker of the House Mark Eves to address challenges faced by Mainers in supporting their ability to age successfully in whatever setting they choose. Early work of the Maine Aging Initiative focused on roundtable-style discussions with stakeholders from across economic sectors to uncover key challenges facing older adults in the coming years, as well as the economic implications that will result from Maine's increasingly aging population. The fact-finding phase of the Maine Aging Initiative culminated in a 2014 Summit where more than 400 stakeholders from across the state worked to develop potential solutions. The resulting *Blueprint for Action on Aging* generated a list of community-based and legislative solutions for building aging-friendly communities, supporting aging through the work of higher educational institutions, addressing workforce and employment challenges, public and private safety, and health and well-being.

To make concrete progress on these policy areas, small workgroups have been formed to move forward the initiative's policy agenda. Other efforts have resulted in the development of a Legislative Aging Caucus with Democratic and Republican membership to move forward aging policy priorities. (Eves and Maurer [2015], this issue, have further discussion of developments from the 2013 round table discussions and 2014 Aging Summit.)

ORGANIZED VOICES FOR AGING IN MAINE

Although these groups differ in their focus areas and methods to various extents, there are commonalities that define these burgeoning efforts to improve the quality of life for older Mainers.

1. **A multidisciplinary and cross-sector focus—**

Across these initiatives, there has been a willingness to include a diversity of perspectives for supporting older Mainers. This has involved raising up the voices of marginalized groups, such as the efforts of SAGE Maine, as well as a willingness to go beyond traditional silos of profession or economic sector. The value of this broad focus is evident in the large and diverse membership of the MCOA, which spans the public, nonprofit, and private sectors, as well as the coming together of multiple disciplines and medical specialties that is a hallmark of Dirigo-Maine Geriatrics Society and MGS.

2. **A comprehensive agenda that recognizes the importance of advocacy, research and education, policy, and practice—**

Across the four initiatives examined in this article, there is a holistic approach to change that recognizes that moving forward on issues facing older Mainers can only happen through multiple means, including supporting smart public policy, advocacy for older adults, research and education efforts, and the practitioners who are working on the ground to improve the quality of life of older Mainers. Examples include the MCOA's *Blueprint*, which outlines both legislative and community-based priorities for better addressing the challenges of an aging state; MGS's focus on building the skills of community practitioners, while informing policy at the state levels; and SAGE Maine's efforts to better connect GLBT adults while also supporting cultural competency in medical providers.

3. **A willingness to step into the policy arena to make a bigger impact—**

A third common element of these initiatives is a willingness to engage with policymakers to advance legislative priorities that are informed by research and on-the-ground experience with the needs of Maine's older adults and promising ways to

address these needs. Whether it is MGS's efforts to support evidence-informed policy, or the MCOA's agenda setting for aging in Maine, organizations are not afraid to enter the policy arena.

EVALUATING THE PROMISE OF ORGANIZED VOICES IN AGING

The associations described here are still relatively young and the full impact of these initiatives and the viability of their approaches is still to be determined. However, there is reason to be optimistic. During the first regular session of the 127th Legislature, nine of thirteen bills in the Council on Aging's legislative package met with success. The bills dealt with issues ranging from increased funding for direct care workers to funding for assistance with money management. Regardless of the outcomes of the specific bills, the creation of a legislative caucus on aging is a feat in itself that will support future efforts to move legislation forward.

As these fledgling associations continue to grow, Maine will begin to see whether the promise of interdisciplinary and cross-sector partnerships will be successful in raising the voices of Maine's older adults and the researchers and professionals serving older adults, and Maine lawmakers with an interest in successful aging. Key challenges for these associations will be to skillfully navigate Maine's challenging fiscal and legislative climate, integrate the insights and priorities of multiple disciplines in a holistic way, and translate insights from gerontological research in ways that are accessible and informative to policymakers. 🐟

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